

Heavy-Light Operations At the National Training Center

Getting the Most Out of the Light Force

by Colonel Frank Stone

"Combat experience from World War II onward compels the increasingly complex integration of combined arms. There is no pure 'heavy' or light scenario; the surest way to achieve success is to balance the array of tactical forces in accordance with METT-T. The combined arms concept requires teamwork, mutual understanding, and the right recognition by everyone involved of the critical roles performed by other arms. There is no place for parochialism or ignorance; success of the mission and the lives of our soldiers will depend upon the ability to understand and synchronize the light-heavy force."

-MG Blackwell, March 1993

Several times each year at the National Training Center (NTC), we attach a light battalion to a heavy brigade to conduct a heavy-light rotation. The addition of a light battalion to the brigade adds significant capabilities to the brigade combat team, providing the brigade commander tactical flexibility he would not otherwise have. However, along with the added capabilities and increased flexibility comes the challenge of integrating the light battalion into the heavy brigade. In this article, I examine some of the challenges associated with integrating the light battalion, review some potential employment options, and highlight some additional considerations for employing a light battalion with a heavy brigade.

Brigade commanders: as the following vignettes based on recent rotations portray, prudent employment of the light battalion will increase your options and enhance your brigade's combat power. In the offense, the light battalion can infiltrate by ground to seize and hold restrictive terrain, allowing the brigade to move faster, or air-assault deep into the enemy's rear, disrupting his defenses to create an exploitable weakness. Additionally, it can

execute tasks that your heavy infantry may not be manned or trained to perform, like attacking in restrictive terrain to defeat enemy infantry in prepared positions.

At the NTC, brigades face some of their greatest challenges in the defense. The light battalion can help here too, by defending in restrictive terrain and allowing you to mass the brigade's heavy systems along the primary mounted avenue of approach. Let's look at some examples.

Clearing Restrictive Terrain

In this example, the brigade conducted a movement to contact in zone (as shown in Figure 1). The brigade staff's analysis indicated initial contact with enemy reconnaissance elements would most likely occur at Phase Line (PL) FORD, but that the brigade would have the advantage if it moved beyond FORD and established a hasty defense on the high ground overlooking PL BARSTOW. The brigade commander agreed with his staff's assessment and assigned the light battalion the task of infiltrating the night before the brigade attack to seize and hold the restrictive terrain along PL FORD at Objective DOG. Success by the light battalion would mean the brigade could cross PL FORD rapidly and be postured to mass fires against the enemy as it crossed PL BARSTOW.

Timely warning orders followed by close coordination among the brigade and battalion staffs throughout the brigade planning process facilitated parallel planning and saved time. Within a few hours after receipt of the brigade order, the light battalion commander met with the brigade commander to discuss his battalion's plan.

These were some key elements in the battalion's plan: first, since intelligence

indicated that Objective DOG was occupied by at least one enemy division reconnaissance team (DRT), the battalion planned to infiltrate by company. Infiltration would help the battalion avoid detection and engagement until it could mass on the objective. Second, the distance from the battalion assembly area to Objective DOG exceeded 20 km. Since helicopters were not available for air infiltration, and the enemy force-to-space ratio in the objective area was low, the battalion would infiltrate by ground vehicle to a concealed point about 10 km from the objective. After dismounting, the battalion planned to infiltrate by companies to a linkup point. Infiltration by companies would allow the battalion to continue should one of the companies be compromised enroute. Following linkup, the battalion would seize the objective, clear the restrictive terrain, and prepare for the brigade's forward passage.

The battalion had divided the objective into three intermediate objectives and planned to seize each sequentially. Sequential seizure would ease command and control, allow the commander to rapidly mass the battalion if required, and simplify clearance of indirect fires. The battalion commander estimated the dismounted infiltration would take 10 hours.

The battalion departed the assembly area at 1500 and arrived at the detrucking point shortly after EENT. Company infiltration to the linkup point was challenging but successful. During the infiltration, enemy reconnaissance elements detected the movement of one company and called indirect fire; however, it was not effective because of the darkness. When attempts to report the contact to brigade were unsuccessful, the battalion relayed the report through another task force. The companies linked up at 0300, and by 0600 had attacked and destroyed

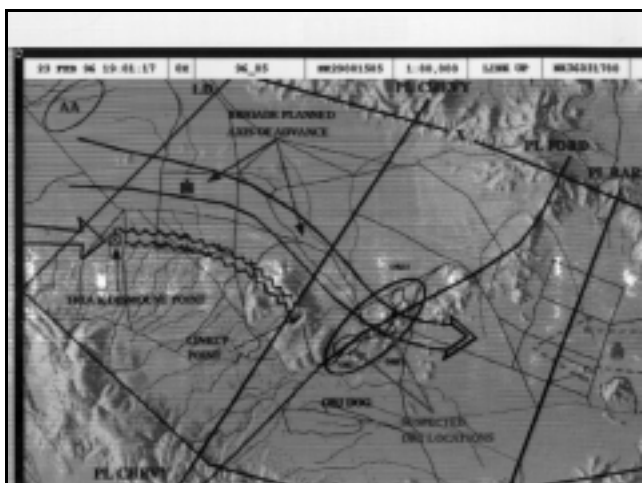


Fig. 1

two division reconnaissance teams in the objective area. During the attack, efforts to call indirect fires on the enemy were not effective and resulted in a near fratricide. The battalion cleared Objective DOG before BMNT, and by first light, the battalion was establishing hasty defensive positions and preparing for the brigade's forward passage. Shortly after 0630, the battalion made initial contact with the advancing brigade elements when the lead platoon from the mech task force took elements of the battalion under direct fire in another near fratricide. Once that was resolved, linkup was completed, and the brigade rapidly passed through and prepared to mass fires against the enemy as he crossed PL BARSTOW.

In this example, several factors contributed to the success of the light battalion and the brigade. First, effective IPB and rapid course of action development by the brigade staff allowed them to provide timely warning orders to the battalion. Second, because of their level of training, the light battalion was able to successfully infiltrate at night, initially by truck, then dismounted by companies, and link up to seize the objective. Finally, the battalion commander clearly understood his task and purpose — to clear the pass to allow the brigade unimpeded movement through the restrictive terrain along PL FORD.

Some Key Points to Consider

- As outlined in FM 7-20, infiltration is a preferred form of maneuver used by light battalions in the offense. At the NTC, light battalions often infiltrate by ground or air to seize key terrain to deny its use by the enemy. Prior to your rotation, consider having the bri-

gade staff review FM 7-20 to become familiar with how to most effectively employ the light infantry battalion in the offense.

- If you intend for the light battalion to infiltrate the night before the heavy elements of the brigade attack, the time available for them to plan and prepare for the mission will be 12 to 18 hours less than for the remainder of the brigade. This makes timely warning orders, parallel planning, and close coordination between the brigade and the light battalion staffs critical throughout planning and preparation for the mission.

- Truck moves in the desert are difficult, particularly at night, and a light battalion is especially vulnerable if they cross the LD mounted — think about overwatching their movement from the LD with tanks or Bradleys. Have a plan to react should they come in contact while mounted.

- The light battalion's rate of movement during a dismounted night infiltration will probably not exceed 1 kph.

- Communicating over long distances with dismounted moving elements requires detailed planning. (Transmission distance for an AN/PRC 119A is 8 km.) You may have to put the brigade retrans out early to ensure communications with the light battalion as they infiltrate.

- Clearance of indirect fires is always a challenge — particularly at night. It is even more difficult if the battalion infiltrates by company or platoon. Anyone who could potentially call or clear indirect fires must understand the control measures and clearance procedures.

- Recognition signals must be briefed down to the lowest level to avoid fratri-

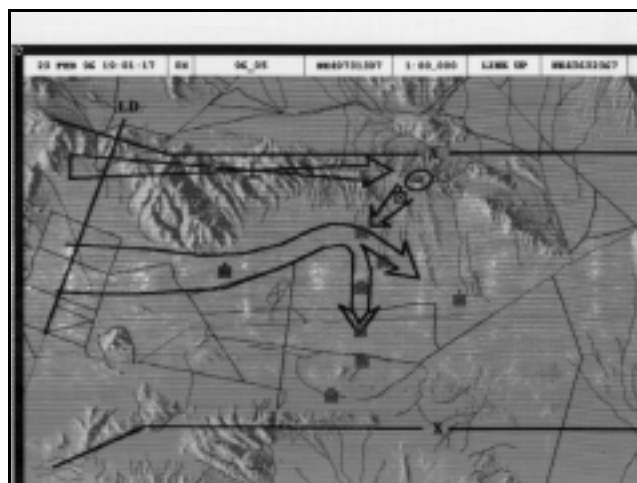


Fig. 2

cide during linkup or passage. Often, the lead tank or Bradley platoon doesn't get the word.

Air Assaulting to Destroy Enemy Forces

In this example, the brigade conducted a deliberate attack against an enemy battalion. Intelligence indicated that the enemy battalion was defending with two motorized rifle companies (MRC) forward and one back with a frontage of 11 km as depicted in Figure 2. Because the terrain leading up to the brigade's tentative point of penetration afforded no concealment, the brigade commander believed that once the brigade crossed the LD, he could not deceive the enemy about where he intended to attack.

His preferred course of action then was to create a weakness in the enemy defenses with the light battalion that the brigade could exploit. To create the weakness, he planned to air assault the light battalion the night before the brigade attack. The light battalion's mission was to air assault behind the enemy defenses to attack and destroy the northern Motorized Rifle Platoon (MRP) of the northern MRC. Following destruction of the MRP, the battalion would establish a hasty defense. The brigade commander intended to attack at first light, link up with the light battalion, and then attack the enemy battalion from north to south.

Conducting a night air assault at the NTC is always a challenge and can be high-risk; for this light battalion it was both. The battalion had not conducted an air assault during the rotation, and had never conducted a battalion level air assault at night. Additionally, the

light and lift battalion commanders and staffs were unfamiliar with each other's SOPs, having come to the NTC from different posts. To further complicate matters, there were not enough helicopters available to move the battalion in one lift, and illumination at the time of the air assault would be zero. Finally, the brigade staff was not experienced in planning air assault operations, which slowed the planning and coordination effort.

Planning this mission was a challenge. As the Air Assault Task Force Commander (AATFC), the light battalion commander and his staff worked carefully along with the lift commander and his staff to put together the five basic plans necessary to conduct the operation. (Five basic plans: ground tactical plan, landing plan, air movement plan, loading plan, and staging plan). The planners from the two battalions held an air mission coordination meeting to ensure the details necessary for the air assault were coordinated and would support the ground tactical plan. When planning and coordination were complete, the key leaders and the staffs from both battalions attended the Air Mission Brief to ensure the details of the plan were finalized and understood. In the end, with much hard work, the two battalion commanders and their staffs pulled the plan together in time for execution.

The air assault did not go without a hitch. In the darkness, as aircraft were lost due to maintenance and ground fire, the battalion discovered it had no plan to prioritize loads — no bump plan. In the ensuing confusion, the S3/air lost control of the PZ which resulted in loads being lifted in the wrong order and with the wrong equipment. Loss of communications between the Pickup Zone (PZ) and LZ, and between the battalion and brigade TOCs, added to the confusion on the LZ as the battalion commander and S3 tried to figure out what was where, and to report progress to the brigade commander. Loss of communications with the brigade also hindered battalion efforts to get indirect fire support. Finally, failure to coordinate for evacuation of casualties on lift aircraft caused casualties to stack up on the LZ and resulted in a high died-of-wounds rate. Darkness and confusion affected the OPFOR as well. Instead of reacting vigorously, the OPFOR commander misread the threat, allowing the light battalion to execute its ground tactical plan and defeat the northern MRP, cre-

ating the weakness the brigade needed to penetrate.

Some Key Points to Consider

- The light battalion and the lift battalion cannot plan and execute a battalion air assault alone — it must be a brigade effort. Have your staff review *FM 90-4 Air Assault Operations* before the rotation, then develop a brigade air assault planning and execution SOP.

- When the light battalion air assaults, the brigade staff must consider how long they will be on the ground before linkup with the heavy forces. Consider how they will be resupplied if necessary and how casualties will be evacuated.

- Air assault communications planning deserves your personal attention. Plans must be detailed and provide for redundant communications means. The enemy will react to the air assault and you will have to adjust your plans — tough to do without good communications.

- Plans for artillery support, to include Suppression of Enemy Air Defense (SEAD) and radar zones, require detailed planning and rehearsals.

- If the light battalion and the lift battalion have not worked together before the rotation, take advantage of the time you spend in the "Dustbowl" to conduct air assault training and review planning procedures.

Performing Infantry Intensive Tasks

At the NTC, your brigade may have to execute missions for which the mechanized infantry battalion has insufficient dismounted infantry, or for which their dismounted infantry is not trained. Clearing a trench in live fire might fall into this category. As I will describe in the following vignette, a light battalion is usually trained to perform this task, and can enable your brigade to move through an enemy position prepared in restrictive terrain and continue the attack.

In this example the brigade had the mission to attack along Axis SILVER to destroy an MRB (-) located at Objective BIRD. As depicted in Figure 3, intelligence indicated an enemy MRP; with 3 BMPs, 30 infantry, and reinforced with a tank, occupying a security position in the trenchline at Objective ALPINE, astride the axis of ad-

vance. The S2 believed the enemy would withdraw if it sustained 50 percent casualties.

Further mission analysis by the brigade highlighted several additional points. First, although the terrain leading to the enemy position was too restrictive for a mounted attack, the Bradley battalion did not have sufficient infantry to attack dismounted and defeat the entrenched enemy. Second, division would not allow the brigade to bypass the platoon position. The plan to have the light battalion infiltrate to attack and defeat the platoon, and then pass the brigade through, appeared to be the most viable course of action.

The light battalion commander and his staff studied the mission and developed a plan. Twenty-four hours before the battalion crossed the LD, the scout platoon would infiltrate to the objective area to confirm routes, find a position for the light COLT, and position guides at the dismount point. Later, the battalion would infiltrate by truck under the cover of darkness along Route BLACK (no air lift assets were available), then dismount and infiltrate two companies on foot over the ridge to a point overlooking the flank of the objective. The third company, the battalion TOWs, the sapper platoon, and the battalion mortars would infiltrate along Axis SILVER, clearing the restrictive terrain as far as Point C. The light COLT would accompany these elements to observe Copperhead and HE fires on the objective.

The battalion planned a 30-minute artillery preparation, concluding with 60mm mortars firing WP as the signal to shift artillery and 81mm fires to the rear of the objective. Once the artillery preparation began, the support elements on each axis would move forward to establish support-by-fire (SBF) positions. Sixty millimeter mortars and M-60 machine guns would fire final suppressive fires from SBF positions before the assault. After the objective was secure, tactical obstacles in the objective area could be reduced unopposed, and the brigade heavy forces could pass through.

The brigade commander planned to have a tank-heavy company team, with a heavy engineer platoon, move forward once the assault was complete to assist in obstacle reduction and lane marking to facilitate the passage.

The attack went well. Led by scouts, the battalion moved well throughout

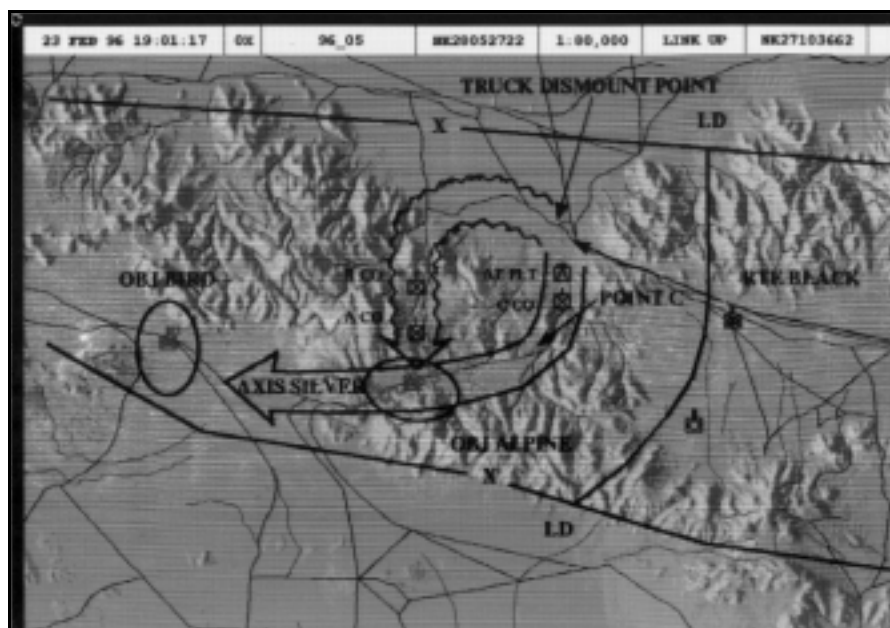


Fig. 3

the night and at dawn was positioned to observe the artillery preparation of the objective. The preparation began with Copperhead, which destroyed the tank, and continued for 30 minutes. On the WP signal from the 60mm mortars, artillery and 81mm mortar fires shifted to the rear of the objective. The 60mm mortars continued to suppress the objective to allow the SBF elements to take up their positions. Once in position, the support elements began firing on the objective with M-60 machine guns and TOWs. When TOWs destroyed two more BMPs, the remaining armored vehicle withdrew. As the support element continued to suppress, the assault element attacked and cleared the trench works. Once the objective was secure, heavy engineers moved forward to assist the light engineers in the unopposed breaching, clearing and marking lanes through the obstacle for the brigade's heavy forces.

Some Key Points to Consider

- The light battalion may need help getting to the objective area. The brigade staff should complete a detailed terrain analysis of potential mounted and dismounted routes, and calculate estimated mounted and dismounted movement times.
- Attacking an entrenched enemy is a difficult task requiring detailed planning and coordination. For the brigade to support the light battalion, the brigade staff must be thoroughly familiar with the light battalion's plan.
- In restrictive terrain, the light commander's C2 will be stretched as he tries to maintain stealth and position support, breach, and assault elements.

Avoid the temptation to augment them with elements that may make their stealthy movement more difficult.

- The brigade FSCOORD must know how the battalion's 81mm and 60mm mortars fit into the plan.
- Make sure your staff understands the light battalion's breaching capability and how it intends to breach and mark lanes for passage of the heavy force. Most light battalions have never breached lanes for a heavy force and light engineers have limited breaching and marking capability.
- If you give the light battalion a heavy team it should be OPCON rather than attached. And remember, the light

battalion commander may not have experience at controlling the fires or movement of a heavy team.

- FM communications between the light battalion and the brigade TOC will be difficult in restrictive terrain. The brigade signal officer must be involved in the placement of retrans assets.

Allowing the Brigade to Mass: Heavy Systems in the Defense

Defense in sector is one of the most difficult missions your brigade will face. As described in the following vignette, the light battalion can contribute by defending in restrictive terrain and allowing you to mass the brigade's heavy systems along the primary armor avenue of approach.

In this example, the brigade defended in sector with two balanced heavy task forces and a light battalion, as shown in Figure 4. The sector was 14 km wide, and included both open and restrictive terrain along multiple avenues of approach. The multiple avenues available to the enemy and his potential courses of action presented a significant challenge for the brigade commander and the staff. Having been successful against the enemy's reconnaissance efforts, the brigade expected him to attack in regimental advance guard formation with the lead motorized rifle battalion (MRB) providing combat reconnaissance patrols (CRP) and a motorized rifle company (MRC)-sized forward security element (FSE). The remainder of the lead battalion would

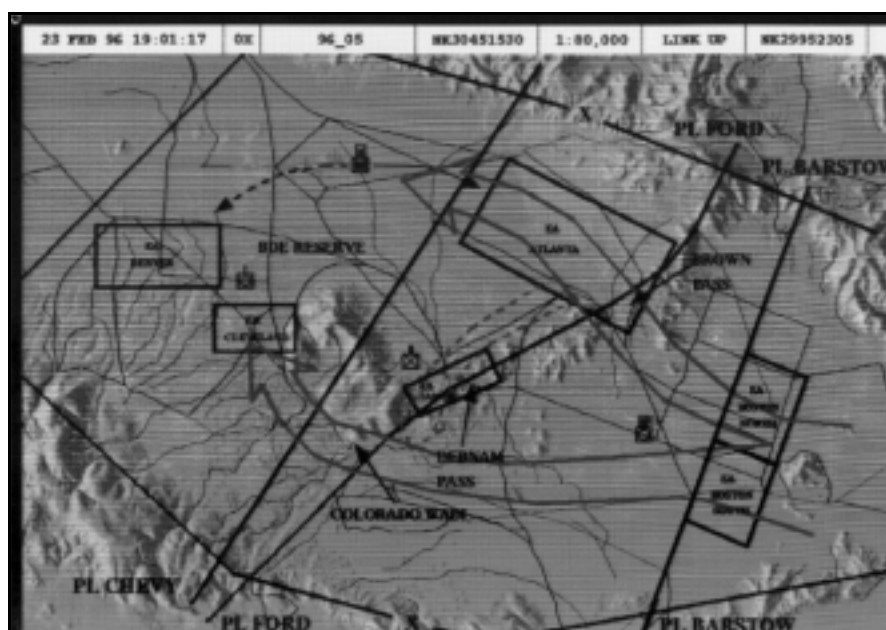


Fig. 4

form the advance guard main body (AGMB). Two MRBs would form the regimental main body, and the fourth MRB would trail as the regimental reserve. In all, the brigade expected to face over 150 enemy armored vehicles.

The brigade commander's concept was to defend in depth. The tank task force, organized with two mech and one tank company, would defend along PL BARSTOW to destroy the advance guard and cause commitment of the regimental main body. The mech task force, organized with two mech and two tank companies, was the brigade main effort and defended west of PL FORD to destroy the main body whether the enemy attacked north or south. The light battalion, with a tank platoon OPCON, would defend the restrictive terrain at Debnam Pass, denying the enemy this cross-mobility corridor. The brigade reserve, a tank company, would be positioned in depth at the center of sector, oriented on EA CLEVELAND. The brigade combat power was just under 90 percent — about 100 armored vehicles.

On the day of the attack, the brigade's forward task force destroyed the regimental advance guard in EA BOSTON but was penetrated by the main body. At this point, the regimental commander sent one MRB north through Brown Pass and one MRB as an enveloping detachment south through the Colorado Wadi. He intended for the regimental reserve to follow in the north.

The MRB attacking in the north moved well until it entered EA ATLANTA, where the mech task force destroyed two of its MRCs. Because the enveloping detachment was moving unhindered in the south, the regimental commander directed the surviving elements of the MRB in the north (remnants of two MRCs) and the regimental reserve to move south through Debnam Pass to join them.

As the two companies moved south, extensive obstacle work, including MOPMs, and aggressive AT ambushes with Dragons and TOWs, along with fires from the tank platoon, were effective in destroying both MRCs in EA TAMPA. By the time the enemy realized the light battalion had denied the Debnam Pass cross-mobility corridor, it was too late; he had committed his force piecemeal.

The brigade reserve and repositioned companies from the mech task force destroyed the remaining elements of the regiment in EAs CLEVELAND

and DENVER. The light battalion had successfully defended the restrictive terrain, denied the cross-mobility corridor to the enemy, and allowed the brigade commander to mass the fires of his heavy systems along the primary mounted avenue of approach.

Some Key Points to Consider

- The light battalion will require help digging in. They will normally come with a sapper platoon to aid in the engineer effort, but it has no heavy digging assets. If you OPCON a tank platoon or heavy team, the light battalion will need to get their fair share of the heavy digging assets.

- The light battalion can be a great help in the construction of wire and mine obstacles. Normally, they will have more soldiers to throw into the effort than a tank or mechanized task force. However, because they have limited capability to move barrier material, even a short distance, it must be delivered to the obstacle site.

- Discuss in detail your concept, and the brigade SOP for constructing and fighting engagement areas with the light battalion commander so you both have a common understanding of what is expected.

- Detailed fire support rehearsals will enhance the light battalion's appreciation for space, time, and triggers in open terrain.

- Light battalions have few long range tank-killing systems; normally four HMMWV-mounted TOWs. And their Dragons normally have little effect on the battlefield unless they mass their fires.

- When properly employed, the modular pack mine system (MOPMS) can be effective against the OPFOR. Coordinate early with the battalion to ensure they train on this system and bring the remote control units.

Additional Considerations

- The light battalion that joins you probably has little corporate knowledge about what to expect at the NTC. Most of the key leaders, and very likely their parent brigade commander, have not been to the NTC on rotation. They will arrive eager to learn, and anxious to demonstrate their capabilities, but don't expect their leaders or soldiers to know as much as you and yours about how the NTC operates. In this regard, don't underestimate the value of the NTC Leader Training Program (LTP). LTP offers a great opportunity to get your

team together, and to seriously consider the capabilities of the light battalion and how they will fight as part of the brigade.

Additionally, consider following up your LTP rotation with several video teleconference sessions to keep each other abreast of preparation for the rotation.

- The light battalion may not know your brigade SOP, or understand your lingo. Consider exchanging LNOs with the light battalion. In addition to a light battalion LNO in your TOC, send an LNO from brigade to work with the light battalion during the rotation. The LNO from brigade will help the light battalion understand how you intend to fight and facilitate parallel planning.

"Hey, face it. Heavy-light is hard; that's why we have to do it."

- NTC OC

Heavy-light rotations at the NTC are challenging, both for the heavy brigade and the light battalion. However, the brigade commander and staff that meet the challenge of integrating the light battalion into the brigade combat team and employ it prudently based on a good understanding of its unique capabilities and limitations will enjoy a rewarding training experience. As I described in the preceding vignettes, a light battalion integrated into the brigade scheme will have a significant impact on the NTC battlefield, both in force-on-force, and live fire. Brigade commanders: "Getting the Most Out of the Light Force" means understanding that, with teamwork and mutual understanding, heavy and light battalions on a brigade team represent a significant combat capability and afford you capabilities and tactical flexibility you would not otherwise have.

Colonel Frank Stone is a Distinguished Military Graduate of North Georgia College. Commissioned Infantry, he is a graduate of Airborne, Ranger, IOBC, IOAC, CGSC, and the National War College. He has served in various command and staff assignments, including commander, 1-16 Infantry (1st Infantry Division). He is currently the Senior Light Task Force Trainer at the National Training Center.